

Savannah Presbytery Reconciliation and Dismissal Policy

Savannah Presbytery recognizes that we live in a complex and changing world. As The Confession of 1967 states:

In each time and place, there are particular problems and crises through which God calls the church to act. The church, guided by the Spirit, humbled by its own complicity and instructed by all attainable knowledge, seeks to discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these concrete situations. [9.43]

Even as we seek to discern God's will for today's situations, they can be so complex that we do not find reasonable common ground among all. We find that sometimes, in certain areas, as the Apostle Paul wrote, we "*see in a mirror dimly*" and will only know what is perfect when "*that which is perfect has come.*" Often the clearest vision is to walk by faith, hope, and love as we relate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to our time and place. [1 Cor. 13:9-13]

Savannah Presbytery is committed to pursuing reconciliation with pastors, sessions, and congregations who are considering dismissal from our denomination. Whether that reconciliation takes the form of dismissal or mutually accepted re-commitment to the Presbytery-congregational relationship, it is the will of this Presbytery to create a gracious context and process in which the will of God is sought for the life, ministry, and calling of the particular congregation.

All congregations of this Presbytery are invited to commit to this broad understanding of reconciliation with a graciousness befitting those who claim Jesus as Lord. The Presbytery and congregations will be continually guided by these three principles:

1. The Mission of God as expressed in the Great Ends of the Church is greater than the PC(U.S.A.). Therefore, we affirm that should Presbytery dismiss a congregation to another Reformed body, the unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ has not been diminished.(F-1.0302 and F-1.0304)
2. The exercise of "mutual forbearance" is of utmost importance in our process. Therefore, all will treat each other with respect regardless of theological and ecclesiological differences.
3. We will work for fairness to all parties in our decisions.

The discernment process shall begin with the session of a particular church. A session wishing to initiate this process shall put the matter to a vote. If at a duly noticed meeting with appropriate quorum, the session votes by two-thirds majority to initiate the discernment process, the Clerk of Session shall contact the Presbytery office and inform the Stated Clerk in writing of this desire.

The session shall then call a congregational meeting. At that meeting, the congregation shall vote on two issues. The first is whether or not to participate in the discernment process put forth in this document. The second item is to establish a quorum of no less than 50% for any future meeting(s) to vote on requesting dismissal from the PC (U.S.A.). If both these items are approved, the Clerk of the Session shall inform the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery that the

congregation wishes to enter into a time of discernment with the Presbytery, and a Covenant Agreement (see below) will be signed.

A Discernment Team shall then be formed consisting of four representatives from the church and four representatives from the Presbytery. The session of the congregation shall select the representatives from the church, one from the church staff, one from the session and two at-large, active members of the congregation. The Presbytery Moderator, Moderator of Council and General Presbyter shall recommend to Council two Ruling Elders and two Teaching Elders to represent the Presbytery.

The Stated Clerk of the Presbytery (or the Clerk's designated representative) will convene the first meeting of the Discernment Team. At this meeting, the Discernment Process will be reviewed and a facilitator shall be chosen. The facilitator will not be one of the eight members of the Discernment Team and shall have voice but not vote during the discernment process. The Discernment Team shall covenant to meet together regularly with the following goals:

- To share their faith stories and their understanding of the spiritual and theological issues at stake between the congregation and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
- To dialogue on foundational theological issues and to seek to determine how much common theological and ecclesiastical ground exists between the congregation, the Presbytery and the denomination.
- To come up with a process for listening to the concerns, sensitivities and questions of any and all congregation members who wish to share.
- Upon completion of the listening process the Discernment Team will discuss the concerns, sensitivities and questions that were shared by congregation members.

After listening to each other, listening to the congregation and discussing all that has been shared, the Discernment Team shall make a report of their findings to the congregation in a "town hall" meeting setting. In addition, a written report (or majority/minority reports, if applicable) will be mailed to all members of the congregation.

It is hoped that the above Discernment Process will lead to continued, and even transformed, relationship between the congregation and Savannah Presbytery. If this is indeed the case, the following are possible steps to help reinforce this connectional relationship:

- The sharing of story and testimony from members of the Discernment Team and congregation at the congregational and Presbytery level.
- Conducting a public service of worship and reaffirmation to shared fellowship and ministry, with participation from Presbytery and congregation.
- The Discernment Team can assist the Session in writing a covenant that reaffirms and articulates the nature and specifics of the future relationship between the congregation, Presbytery and the PC(U.S.A.).
- Blessing and commissioning any who wish to leave the local congregation (to the extent possible), in the hope of maintaining bonds of peace.

Procedure for Seeking Dismissal

If, after the Discernment Process is followed, a session and congregation feels that it is best served by entering into a process of seeking dismissal, the following procedures shall be followed:

1. The session shall call for a meeting of the congregation. Advance notice for the meeting shall be by written letter to each member on the active roll of the congregation who is eligible to vote at the meeting (this list shall also be given to the Stated Clerk). The letter shall be mailed at least thirty (30) days in advance of the meeting date and shall include:
 - a. the motion from the session to be dismissed to a particular Reformed body
 - b. a written statement from the Discernment Team majority and minority (if applicable)
 - c. possible financial terms of dismissal (see below)
2. Members eligible to vote at the congregational meeting shall be active members as of the date of the letter calling the congregational meeting. All members present, as well as the representatives of Presbytery, shall have the right to speak. When the discussion is concluded, the vote shall be taken by written ballot. At least two-thirds of those present to vote must vote in favor of requesting dismissal to another Reformed body in order for the proposal to pass.
3. If at least two-thirds of those voting request dismissal, the Presbytery shall agree to the dismissal in principle, and final negotiations shall begin.

At this point, the Discernment Team shall become the Negotiating Team to establish the terms of dismissal. If there are members of the Discernment Team who do not wish to continue in this new role, the session and Presbytery Council shall elect replacements, following the procedures outlined above. The Negotiating Team shall consult with the session and Presbytery, as well as the Synod and General Assembly as needed. A final dismissal settlement for a congregation shall include:

1. Determining the date of dismissal to another Reformed body.
2. A recommendation on the continued use of the congregation's name.
3. An assessment of the value of all property and assets. This work shall be done in collaboration with the Presbytery Trustees.
4. An agreement to contribute to the ongoing work of Savannah Presbytery the greater of: the per-member share of the current Presbytery budget or the average of the congregation's past three years of contributions to the Presbytery. The contributions will continue for 5 years on a sliding scale (year 1 – 100%; year 2 – 80%; year 3 – 60%; year 4 – 40%; year 5 – 20%).
5. Support for a viable minority who wishes to stay within the PC(U.S.A.) and expresses this in writing. The Negotiating Team shall come up with a fair and equitable settlement with the dismissed congregation that would be used by the Presbytery to help the development of a new congregation within Savannah Presbytery comprised initially of said minority group.
6. Addressing any issues related to membership rolls, insurance policies, Board of Pensions dues, outstanding loans, corporate documents, etc. that will need to be changed, revised or terminated to reflect the new status of the dismissed congregation.

The final negotiated dismissal settlement shall be presented to the congregation and to the Presbytery for approval. In addition, the Presbytery shall, in conjunction with the congregation, hold a final worship service of commissioning, to celebrate our common life in Jesus Christ and to pray for the effectiveness and well-being of both the congregation and the Presbytery. Those departing the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will be commissioned by the Presbytery to further their work for the kingdom as they go forward in ministry. The service will be jointly planned by members of Presbytery Council and the session, and all congregations of the Presbytery shall be invited.

Alternative Procedure for a Church Considering or Seeking Dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

If a session chooses not to follow this Reconciliation and Dismissal process, abandons these processes before completion, or if members of the session or congregation seek to undermine the process, then the Presbytery shall address issues within the congregation using a duly elected and authorized Administrative Commission (“AC”). The primary task of the AC is to “attempt to inquire into and settle the difficulties” of the church in question. The authority of the AC will be specifically defined for the situation. Powers of the AC may include authorization for the AC to assume jurisdiction in whole or in part over the affairs of the church with the power to act in place of the session. Powers granted to the AC by the Presbytery may include the authority for the AC:

- to determine whether a schism exists within the congregation (see the *Book of Order*, G-4.0207); if schism exists, to determine if one of the factions of the church represents *the true church within the PC (U.S.A.)* (see the *Book of Order*, G-4.0207);
- to make recommendations to the Presbytery (or to act on behalf of the Presbytery if so charged) to dissolve pastoral relationships or to place pastors on administrative leave.
- to examine and copy whatever records of the church that may be relevant (*e.g.*, how money is held, title to property, title policies, surveys, insurance documents, financial statements and records, budgets, tax returns, bank and account statements, mortgages or other loan documents, corporate articles, bylaws, and charters – especially changes in any of these).
- to assume original jurisdiction (in whole or in part) in any case in which it determines that the session is unable or unwilling to manage wisely the affairs of its church (see *Book of Order*, G-3.02 and G-3.0201);
- to freeze the assets of the church and approved expenditures;
- to secure the building, grounds and other property of the church for the use and benefit of the PC(U.S.A.);
- to determine if and when a meeting of the congregation is appropriate for the purpose of voting to seek dismissal from the PC(U.S.A.);
- to fulfill any other responsibilities as assigned by the Presbytery, or as may be necessary or appropriate in connection therewith or in connection with those set forth above.

The AC shall keep the Presbytery informed of significant actions taken and shall make recommendations directly to the Presbytery for all actions that require the Presbytery’s approval.

Covenant Agreement

In order to: promote the ongoing faithfulness of our members in the work of the Mission of God through Jesus Christ; exercise “mutual forbearance”; treat others with respect regardless of theological and ecclesiological differences; and work for fairness to all parties in our decisions; the Council of Savannah Presbytery and the congregation of _____ Church of _____, Georgia, covenant to follow the Reconciliation and Dismissal Procedure and abide by its terms as a way of discerning God’s will for the relationship between the congregation and Savannah Presbytery.

Moderator of the Session

Moderator of Savannah Presbytery

Clerk of the Session

Stated Clerk of Savannah Presbytery